Chomsky: US Sanctions On Iran Don’t Support The Protests, They Deepen Suffering

Noam Chomsky

Protests have been raging in Iran since mid-September in response to the death of Mahsa Amini, the 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman who died in a hospital in Tehran after being arrested a few days earlier by Iran’s morality police for allegedly breaching the Islamic theocratic regime’s dress code for women. Protesters are widely describing her death as murder perpetrated by the police (the suspicion is that she died from blows to the body), but Iran’s Forensic Organization has denied that account in an official medical report.

Since September, the protests — led by women of all ages in defiance not only of the mandatory dress codes but also against gender violence and state violence of all kinds — have spread to at least 50 cities and towns. Just this week, prominent actors and sports teams have joined the burgeoning protest movement, which is reaching into all sectors of Iranian society.

Women in Iran have a long history of fighting for their rights. They were at the forefront of the 1979 revolution that led to the fall of the Pahlavi regime, though they enjoyed far more liberties under the Shah than they would after the Ayatollah Khomeini took over. As part of Khomeini’s mission to establish an Islamic theocracy, it was decreed immediately after the new regime was put in place that women were henceforth mandated to wear the veil in government

offices. Iranian women organized massive demonstrations when they heard that the new government would enforce mandatory veiling. But the theocratic regime that replaced the Shah was determined to quash women's autonomy. "In 1983, Parliament decided that women who do not cover their hair in public will be punished with 74 lashes," the media outlet *Deutsche Welle* reports. "Since 1995, unveiled women can also be imprisoned for up to 60 days."

But today's protests are a display of opposition not just to certain laws but to the entire theocratic system in Iran: As Frieda Afary reported for *Truthout*, protesters have chanted that they want "neither monarchy, nor clergy." And as Sima Shakhsari writes, the protests are also about domestic economic policies whose effects have been compounded by U.S. sanctions.

The protests have engulfed much of the country and are now supported by workers across industries, professionals like doctors and lawyers, artists and shopkeepers. In response, the regime is intensifying its violent crackdown on protesters and scores of artists, filmmakers and journalists have been arrested or banned from work over their support for the anti-government protests.

Is this a revolution in the making? Noam Chomsky sheds insight on this question and more in the exclusive interview below. Chomsky is institute professor emeritus in the department of linguistics and philosophy at MIT and laureate professor of linguistics and Agnese Nelms Haury Chair in the Program in Environment and Social Justice at the University of Arizona. One of the world's most-cited scholars and a public intellectual regarded by millions of people as a national and international treasure, Chomsky has published more than 150 books in linguistics, political and social thought, political economy, media studies, U.S. foreign policy and world affairs. His latest books are *The Secrets of Words* (with Andrea Moro; MIT Press, 2022); *The Withdrawal: Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and the Fragility of U.S. Power* (with Vijay Prashad; The New Press, 2022); and *The Precipice*: *Neoliberalism, the Pandemic and the Urgent Need for Social Change* (with C.J. Polychroniou; Haymarket Books, 2021).

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, Iranian women started these protests over the government's Islamic policies, especially those around dress codes, but the protests seem now to be about overall reform failures on the part of the regime. The state of the economy, which is in a downward spiral, also seems to be one of the forces sending people into the streets with demands for change. In fact,

teachers, shopkeepers and workers across industries have engaged in sit-down strikes and walkouts, respectively, amid the ongoing protests. Moreover, there seems to be unity between different ethnic subgroups that share public anger over the regime, which may be the first time that this has happened since the rise of the Islamic Republic. Does this description of what's happening in Iran in connection with the protests sound fairly accurate to you? If so, is it also valid to speak of a revolution in the making?

Noam Chomsky: It sounds accurate to me, though it may go too far in speaking of a revolution in the making.

What's happening is quite remarkable, in scale and intensity and particularly in the courage and defiance in the face of brutal repression. It is also remarkable in the prominent leadership role of women, particularly young women.

The term "leadership" may be misleading. The uprising seems to be leaderless, also without clearly articulated broader goals or platform apart from overthrowing a hated regime. On that matter words of caution are in order. We have very little information about public opinion in Iran, particularly about attitudes in the rural areas, where support for the clerical regime and its authoritarian practice may be much stronger.

Regime repression has been much harsher in the areas of Iran populated by Kurdish and Baluchi ethnic minorities. It's generally recognized that much will depend on how Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei will react. Those familiar with his record anticipate that his reaction will be colored by his own experience in the resistance that overthrew the Shah in 1979. He may well share the view of U.S. and Israeli hawks that if the Shah had been more forceful, and had not vacillated, he could have suppressed the protests by violence. Israel's de facto Ambassador to Iran, Uri Lubrani, expressed their attitude clearly at the time: "I very strongly believe that Tehran can be taken over by a very relatively small force, determined, ruthless, cruel. I mean the men who would lead that force will have to be emotionally geared to the possibility that they'd have to kill ten thousand people."

Similar views were expressed by former CIA director Richard Helms, Carter high Pentagon official Robert Komer, and other hard-liners. It is speculated that Khamenei will adopt a similar stance, ordering considerably more violent

repression if the protests proceed.

As to the effects, we can only speculate with little confidence.

In the West, the protests are widely interpreted as part of a continuous struggle for a secular, democratic Iran but with complete omission of the fact that the current revolutionary forces in Iran are opposing not only the reactionary government in Tehran but also neoliberal capitalism and the hegemony of the U.S. The Iranian government, on the other hand, which is using brutal tactics to disperse demonstrations across the country, is blaming the protests on "foreign hands." To what extent should we expect to see interaction of foreign powers with domestic forces in Iran? After all, such interaction played a major role in the shaping and fate of the protests that erupted in the Arab world in 2010 and 2011.

There can hardly be any doubt that the U.S. will provide support for efforts to undermine the regime, which has been a prime enemy since 1979, when the U.S.-backed tyrant who was re-installed by the U.S. by a military coup in 1953 was overthrown in a popular uprising. The U.S. at once gave strong support to its then-friend Saddam Hussein in his murderous assault against Iran, finally intervening directly to ensure Iran's virtual capitulation, an experience not forgotten by Iranians, surely not by the ruling powers.

When the war ended, the U.S. imposed harsh sanctions on Iran. President Bush I — the statesman Bush — invited Iraqi nuclear engineers to the U.S. for advanced training in nuclear weapons development and sent a high-level delegation to assure Saddam of Washington's strong support for him. All very serious threats to Iran.

Punishment of Iran has continued since and remains bipartisan policy, with little public debate. Britain, Iran's traditional torturer before the U.S. displaced it in the 1953 coup that overthrew Iranian democracy, is likely, as usual, to trail obediently behind the U.S., perhaps other allies. Israel surely will do what it can to overthrow its archenemy since 1979 — previously a close ally under the Shah, though the intimate relations were clandestine.

Both the U.S. and the European Union imposed new sanctions on Iran over the crackdown on protests. Haven't sanctions against Iran been counterproductive? In fact, don't sanctioned regimes tend to become more authoritarian and repressive, with ordinary people being hurt much more than those in power?

We always have to ask: Counterproductive for whom? Sanctions do typically have the effect you describe and would be "counterproductive" if the announced goals — always noble and humane — had anything to do with the real ones. That's rarely the case.

The sanctions have severely harmed the Iranian economy, incidentally causing enormous suffering. But that has been the U.S. goal for over 40 years. For Europe it's a different matter. European business sees Iran as an opportunity for investment, trade and resource extraction, all blocked by the U.S. policy of crushing Iran.

The same in fact is true of corporate America. This is one of the rare and instructive cases — Cuba is another — where the short-term interests of the owners of the society are not "most peculiarly attended to" by the government they largely control (to borrow Adam Smith's term for the usual practice). The government, in this case, pursues broader class interests, not tolerating "dangerous" independence of its will. That's an important matter, which, in the case of Iran, goes back in some respects to Washington's early interest in Iran in 1953. And in the case of Cuba goes back to its liberation in 1959.

One final question: What impact could the protests have across the Middle East?

It depends very much on the outcome, still up in the air. I don't see much reason to expect a major effect, whatever the outcome. Shiite Iran is quite isolated in the largely Sunni region. The Sunni dictatorships of the Gulf are slightly mending fences with Iran, much to the displeasure of Washington, but they are hardly likely to be concerned with brutal repression, their own way of life.

A successful popular revolution would doubtless concern them and might "spread contagion," as Kissingerian rhetoric puts it. But that remains too remote a contingency for now to allow much useful speculation.

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The Renewable Energy Transition Is Failing

Richard Heinberg – richardheinberg.com

Despite all the renewable energy investments and installations, actual global greenhouse gas emissions keep increasing. That's largely due to economic

growth: While renewable energy supplies have expanded in recent years, world energy usage has ballooned even more—with the difference being supplied by fossil fuels. The more the world economy grows, the harder it is for additions of renewable energy to turn the tide by actually replacing energy from fossil fuels, rather than just adding to it.

The notion of voluntarily reining in economic growth in order to minimize climate change and make it easier to replace fossil fuels is political anathema not just in the rich countries, whose people have gotten used to consuming at extraordinarily high rates, but even more so in poorer countries, which have been promised the opportunity to "develop."

After all, it is the rich countries that have been responsible for the great majority of past emissions (which are driving climate change presently); indeed, these countries got rich largely by the industrial activity of which carbon emissions were a byproduct. Now it is the world's poorest nations that are experiencing the brunt of the impacts of climate change caused by the world's richest. It's neither sustainable nor just to perpetuate the exploitation of land, resources, and labor in the less industrialized countries, as well as historically exploited communities in the rich countries, to maintain both the lifestyles and expectations of further growth of the wealthy minority.

From the perspective of people in less-industrialized nations, it's natural to want to consume more, which only seems fair. But that translates to more global economic growth, and a harder time replacing fossil fuels with renewables globally. China is the exemplar of this conundrum: Over the past three decades, the world's most populous nation lifted hundreds of millions of its people out of poverty, but in the process became the world's biggest producer and consumer of coal.

The Materials Dilemma

Also posing an enormous difficulty for a societal switch from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources is our increasing need for minerals and metals. The World Bank, the IEA, the IMF, and McKinsey and Company have all issued reports in the last couple of years warning of this growing problem. Vast quantities of minerals and metals will be required not just for making solar panels and wind turbines, but also for batteries, electric vehicles, and new industrial

equipment that runs on electricity rather than carbon-based fuels.

Some of these materials are already showing signs of increasing scarcity: According to the World Economic Forum, the average cost of producing copper has risen by over 300 percent in recent years, while copper ore grade has dropped by 30 percent.

Optimistic assessments of the materials challenge suggest there are enough global reserves for a one-time build-out of all the new devices and infrastructure needed (assuming some substitutions, with, for example, lithium for batteries eventually being replaced by more abundant elements like iron). But what is society to do as that first generation of devices and infrastructure ages and requires replacement?

Circular Economy: A Mirage?

Hence the rather sudden and widespread interest in the creation of a circular economy in which everything is recycled endlessly. Unfortunately, as economist Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen discovered in his pioneering work on entropy, recycling is always incomplete and always costs energy. Materials typically degrade during each cycle of use, and some material is wasted in the recycling process.

A French preliminary analysis of the energy transition that assumed maximum possible recycling found that a materials supply crisis could be delayed by up to three centuries. But will the circular economy (itself an enormous undertaking and a distant goal) arrive in time to buy industrial civilization those extra 300 years? Or will we run out of critical materials in just the next few decades in our frantic effort to build as many renewable energy devices as we can in as short a time as possible?

The latter outcome seems more likely if pessimistic resource estimates turn out to be accurate. Simon Michaux of the Finnish Geological Survey finds that "[g]lobal reserves are not large enough to supply enough metals to build the renewable non-fossil fuels industrial system … Mineral deposit discovery has been declining for many metals. The grade of processed ore for many of the industrial metals has been decreasing over time, resulting in declining mineral processing yield. This has the implication of the increase in mining energy consumption per unit of metal."

Steel prices are already trending higher, and lithium supplies may prove to be a bottleneck to rapidly increasing battery production. Even sand is getting scarce: Only certain grades of the stuff are useful in making concrete (which anchors wind turbines) or silicon (which is essential for solar panels). More sand is consumed yearly than any other material besides water, and some climate scientists have identified it as a key sustainability challenge this century. Predictably, as deposits are depleted, sand is becoming more of a geopolitical flashpoint, with China recently embargoing sand shipments to Taiwan with the intention of crippling Taiwan's ability to manufacture semiconductor devices such as cell phones.

To Reduce Risk, Reduce Scale

During the fossil fuel era, the global economy depended on ever-increasing rates of extracting and burning coal, oil, and natural gas. The renewables era (if it indeed comes into being) will be founded upon the large-scale extraction of minerals and metals for panels, turbines, batteries, and other infrastructure, which will require periodic replacement.

These two economic eras imply different risks: The fossil fuel regime risked depletion and pollution (notably atmospheric carbon pollution leading to climate change); the renewables regime will likewise risk depletion (from mining minerals and metals) and pollution (from dumping old panels, turbines, and batteries, and from various manufacturing processes), but with diminished vulnerability to climate change. The only way to lessen risk altogether would be to reduce substantially society's scale of energy and materials usage—but very few policymakers or climate advocacy organizations are exploring that possibility.

Climate Change Hobbles Efforts to Combat Climate Change

As daunting as they are, the financial, political, and material challenges to the energy transition don't exhaust the list of potential barriers. Climate change itself is also hampering the energy transition—which, of course, is being undertaken to *avert* climate change.

During the summer of 2022, China experienced its most intense heat wave in six decades. It impacted a wide region, from central Sichuan Province to coastal Jiangsu, with temperatures often topping 40 degrees Celsius, or 104 degrees Fahrenheit, and reaching a record 113 degrees in Chongqing on August 18. At the

same time, a drought-induced power crisis forced Contemporary Amperex Technology Co., the world's top battery maker, to close manufacturing plants in China's Sichuan province. Supplies of crucial parts to Tesla and Toyota were temporarily cut off.

Meanwhile, a similarly grim story unfolded in Germany, as a record drought reduced the water flow in the Rhine River to levels that crippled European trade, halting shipments of diesel and coal, and threatening the operations of both hydroelectric and nuclear power plants.

A study published in February 2022 in the journal Water found that droughts (which are becoming more frequent and severe with climate change) could create challenges for U.S. hydropower in Montana, Nevada, Texas, Arizona, California, Arkansas, and Oklahoma.

Meanwhile, French nuclear plants that rely on the Rhône River for cooling water have had to shut down repeatedly. If reactors expel water downstream that's too hot, aquatic life is wiped out as a result. So, during the sweltering 2022 summer, Électricité de France (EDF) powered down reactors not only along the Rhône but also on a second major river in the south, the Garonne. Altogether, France's nuclear power output has been cut by nearly 50 percent during the summer of 2022. Similar drought- and heat-related shutdowns happened in 2018 and 2019.

Heavy rain and flooding can also pose risks for both hydro and nuclear power—which together currently provide roughly four times as much low-carbon electricity globally as wind and solar combined. In March 2019, severe flooding in southern and western Africa, following Cyclone Idai, damaged two major hydro plants in Malawi, cutting off power to parts of the country for several days.

Wind turbines and solar panels also rely on the weather and are therefore also vulnerable to extremes. Cold, cloudy days with virtually no wind spell trouble for regions heavily reliant on renewable energy. Freak storms can damage solar panels, and high temperatures reduce panels' efficiency. Hurricanes and storm surges can cripple offshore wind farms.

The transition from fossil fuel to renewables faces an uphill battle. Still, this switch is an essential stopgap strategy to keep electricity grids up and running, at least on a minimal scale, as civilization inevitably turns away from a depleting store of oil and gas. The world has become so dependent on grid power for

communications, finance, and the preservation of technical, scientific, and cultural knowledge that, if the grids were to go down permanently and soon, it is likely that billions of people would die, and the survivors would be culturally destitute. In essence, we need renewables for a controlled soft landing. But the harsh reality is that, for now, and in the foreseeable future, the energy transition is not going well and has poor overall prospects.

We need a realistic plan for energy descent, instead of foolish dreams of eternal consumer abundance by means other than fossil fuels. Currently, politically rooted insistence on continued economic growth is discouraging truth-telling and serious planning for how to live well with less.

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Across Africa, Water Conflict Threatens Security, Health, And The Environment

Photo: en.wikipedia.org

Water is a finite resource on our planet. We can only rely on what we have, which translates to about 2.5 percent of drinkable fresh water. Of that amount, only 0.4 percent currently exists in lakes, rivers, and moisture in the atmosphere.
The strain of this limited supply grows by the day and as this continues, the detrimental impact will continue to be felt in places least equipped to find alternative solutions—in particular, the African continent.

The global population is estimated to reach around 9.6 billion people by 2050. This is triple the number of humans on the planet just a few decades ago, having to exist with the same amount of water, not taking into account the nonhuman animals and plants that also rely on water to survive.

More than a third of the planet's population living without access to clean, safe water live in sub-Saharan Africa. And nearly two-thirds—four billion people—live in water-scarce areas. With this number set to steadily rise, the United Nations predicts that around 700 million people across the world might be "displaced by intense water scarcity" by 2030.

Scarcity-Led Conflict and Crisis

Each year, the world is seeing extreme water-related events including heatwaves and droughts. In 2021 on the African continent alone, Madagascar, Kenya, and Somalia experienced severe water shortages. And with scarcity, conflict tends to follow.

A number of African conflicts are being fueled by competition for dwindling natural resources. At a state level, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan have been engaged

in a continuing dispute over fresh water in the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Similar issues are playing out across every level of society.

Cameroon, for instance, experienced a violent dispute over water between fishermen and herders in a town near the border of Chad in December 2021. The disagreement over rights to water found in a shrinking Lake Chad led to the death of 22 people and a further 100,000 people displaced from their homes as the two groups fought.

"Once conflicts escalate, they are hard to resolve and can have a negative impact on water security, creating vicious cycles of conflict," said Susanne Schmeier, senior lecturer in water law and diplomacy at IHE Delft.

This negative feedback loop fueled by conflict is further compounded by the effect on water quality, agriculture, and forced migration. "With very rare exceptions, no one dies of literal thirst," said Peter Gleick, head of the Oakland-based Pacific Institute. "But more and more people are dying from contaminated water or conflicts over access to water."

This insight speaks to the complex interplay between water shortage and conflict. According to research from the Pacific Institute, the impact of water on agriculture plays an even greater role in contributing to conflict—a view backed up by the fact that agriculture accounts for 70 percent of fresh water use in Africa.

Another conflict-causing factor is the social impact of water shortages. With up to a quarter of the world's population facing serious water scarcity at least one month of the year, people are being forced to migrate. In 2017, at least 20 million people from Africa and the Middle East left their homes due to food shortages and conflict caused by serious drought.

Food Insecurity Due to Impact on Wildlife and Agriculture

Food insecurity caused by water shortages is being compounded by the loss of wildlife. With a drop in their rainy seasons, Kenya's sheep, camels, and cattle have been in decline. This has led to a threat of 2.5 million people potentially going without food due to drought, according to the United Nations.

The impact of drought is taking a severe toll on agriculture, particularly in

counties where this forms the mainstay of their economy. In South Africa, for instance, agriculture is key to the functioning of the country when it comes to job creation, food security, rural development, and foreign exchange.

Water shortages in the country impact both commercial and subsistence farmers. But it is the subsistence farmers who are hardest hit by the droughts, according to a 2021 paper published by a group of international scientists in the journal Science of the Total Environment.

While commercial farmers are able to offset a lack of rain through alternative water supplies, as well as storage and irrigation technologies, subsistence farmers who are reliant on rain, the scientists write, "are particularly susceptible to drought as they highly depend on climate-sensitive resources." They also point out that the impact is worsened by the fact that this form of farming is tied to farmers' own food security.

Adaptation

There is no way to avoid the impacts of water scarcity and drought. The best thing to do is manage and mitigate risk where possible. A tool proposed by the group Water, Peace and Security is an early warning monitor capable of tracking information on rainfall, crop yields, and political, economic, and social factors. According to the group, this tool would "predict water-related conflicts up to a year in advance, which allows for mediation and government intervention."

Another common de-risking approach to conflict is water-sharing agreements. Since the end of World War II, 200 of these agreements have been signed. Despite this, the UN has consistently failed to introduce a Water Convention that would see over 43 countries sharing transboundary rivers and lakes.

A good example where a water-sharing agreement helped avoid conflict can be found in Southern Africa. In 2000, with tensions rising over shared resources, an agreement was reached between Lesotho, South Africa, Botswana, and Namibia that helped avoid further issues.

Reducing water loss remains the most recommended method countries should adopt to avoid future catastrophes. Agriculture and mining, in particular, are two industries that could do more to limit their water wastage. Another policy, suggested by Iceland, is to increase the price of water in relation to its supply, as

a way to help curb water wastage.

Desalination is also a popular method used to free up more water, using seawater to increase supply. Saudi Arabia, for instance, uses desalination to supply the country with at least 50 percent of its water supply. Water recycling, known as "gray" water is another low-cost alternative used by farmers to offset the impact of drought.

As water scarcity continues to become more commonplace, so too will these mitigation and adaptation strategies. The question is, will they be enough?

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Capitalism Has Ended The Issue Of Scarcity But Worsened The Crisis Of Inequality

Steve Paxton

Capitalism has been around for such a long time that it is hard for people even to imagine a world without it. Yet, it is far from an immutable physical law. In fact, capitalism is now "materially outmoded and ideologically defunct," argues British author Steve Paxton in his forthcoming book, *How Capitalism Ends* (Zero Books, 2022). "The capitalist era has provided the material abundance required for a free human society, but capitalism cannot deliver the freedom its productive capacity makes possible." In the interview that follows, Paxton shares his thoughts on the contours, contradictions and twilight of capitalism with *Truthout*.

Paxton is also the author of *Unlearning Marx — Why the Soviet Failure Was a Triumph for Marx* (Zero Books, 2021). In addition to having an academic career at Oxford, Steve Paxton has worked on building sites and in betting shops, been a PHP programmer and a T-shirt designer, been employed, self-employed and unemployed, blue-collar, white-collar and no-collar. He currently works as a tri-vision engineer in the summer, installing and maintaining sight-screens at cricket grounds, and as a database designer in the winter.

C.J. Polychroniou: Capitalism emerged in western Europe sometime during the long 15th century and has gone since through several distinct stages. Its success lies with the fact that it reorganized production and raised productive capacity at an unprecedented rate. However, there are good reasons to believe that "this system is by now intolerable," as Pope Francis said in a speech some years ago. Indeed, in your own forthcoming book, How Capitalism Ends, you argue that capitalism has reached its limits. Let's start, first, with explaining, from your own perspective, the historical resilience of capitalism, given that the system has experienced a myriad of failures in the past but continues to survive down to the day.

First of all, maybe we shouldn't get too carried away with the idea that capitalism is super-resilient. Although the earliest developments of capitalism date back to before 1500, it was the end of the 17th century before the bourgeoisie came to dominate political power in England and more than another century before the French bourgeois interest was able to match that achievement. The process of enclosure — a fundamental aspect of the development of capitalism in Britain — continued into the second half of the 19th century, so we could argue that the transition to capitalism lasted longer than capitalism proper has so far existed. But, yes, capitalism has survived many crises — largely of its own making — and one of the reasons for that is its unique ability to foster rapid technological

development and therefore to massively increase productive capacity. While there has always been a terrible human cost to capitalist development, there was also a rationale — increased productive capacity raised living standards and life expectancy for huge swathes of the world's population. Complaints against capitalism's injustices have long been met with references to its efficiency — the pie may not be evenly divided, but it relentlessly increases in size. Add to this the fact that a sizeable chunk of the toil and misery involved in capitalist production has been exported to the global south and all this means that until the last few decades, most people in capitalist economies enjoyed a better material life than their parents, which feels to many people like progress. The problem is that the progress is always one dimensional — the nature of capitalism is that it is always about growth, about producing more and better stuff. Even capitalists agree that the system is built on greed and self-interest. Capitalists don't set out to meet our needs, but to increase their own wealth, but — so the story goes — under capitalism the easiest way to get rich is by meeting our needs better than any competitors can. This idea goes right back to Adam Smith and for some time it was true that a byproduct of capitalist self-interest was an improvement in living standards for many — not for all, by any means, but for enough to blunt the opposition to the capitalist system. We have reached the point though where more stuff isn't going to solve the problems we now face. The connection between what makes money for capitalists and what advances civilization has come unstuck. Perhaps we should set out with the aim of catering for people's real needs, regardless of their ability to pay for their subsistence, rather than trying to cater for the ambitions of entrepreneurs to buy more yachts and hoping that the starving might be fed as a by-product of that process.

Like all systems, capitalism also creates a compelling story about how it's not really a system at all, but just the way that the world inevitably has to be and that's a difficult narrative for opponents to challenge. The conversation we urgently need to have — the conversation I hope this book is a contribution to — is about what a post-capitalist world might look like and how we're to move from here to there…

You argue in your book that "scarcity is no longer our enemy" and that inequality is the main problem. Are you saying that capitalism has solved the problem of scarcity? Moreover, aren't capitalism and inequality linked?

Has capitalism solved the problem of scarcity? Largely, yes, in that the major

problems we face in the twenty-first century are not caused by insufficient productive capacity, but by the absence of mechanisms in place to distribute the fruits of that capacity more reasonably. Currently 26 billionaires have the same wealth as the poorest 3.8 billion people on the planet — and almost all of those 3.8 billion live in poverty — with limited access to food, clean water, basic medicines, shelter, security and education. Globally we produce enough material goods for everyone on the planet. That may seem an odd statement, given that 9 million people die of hunger and related causes every year, but then we throw away 1.3 billion tons of food annually and 28 percent of the world's agricultural area is used to produce food that is lost or wasted.

In the 21st century, the problem of human poverty is one of distribution, not scarcity. The capitalist era has provided the material abundance required for a free human society, but capitalism cannot deliver the freedom its productive capacity makes possible. It's time to move on to an economic structure that can deliver that freedom.

The link between capitalism and inequality is complex. Inequality was a feature of pre-capitalist society too, so it's not unique to capitalism, but in terms of material wealth, clearly capitalism has delivered previously unimaginable levels of inequality. On the other hand, capitalist ideology does require the recognition of some kinds of equality — the political and legal inequality of the feudal era was something that held back capitalist development and the ideologues of the emerging bourgeoisie demanded an end to that. Although the equality demanded by capitalist philosophy is strictly limited to equality before the law and (eventually) equality of political participation, and although *really existing capitalism* has often failed to deliver even on these limited ideals, it's important to note that the ideology of the capitalist era does insist on equality of *something* — that there are some rights that accrue to individuals merely on the basis that they are humans, rather than because of a particular social status, or inherited title. The point here is that the equalizing instinct — i.e., the tendency toward egalitarianism — is not an anti-capitalist ideological ambition. The difference between capitalist ideology and socialist ideology is not that one favors equality and the other doesn't, but what kind and extent of equality each requires. So, as long as egalitarianism itself is perceived as an anti-capitalist position, defenders of capitalism will continue to trot out caricatures of the egalitarian spirit as utopian fantasy doomed to end in absurd excess.

Once we recognize that capitalism itself requires (ideologically speaking) some form of equality, then the conversation changes from a discussion of the virtues or otherwise of the process of equalization and has to address what it is that is being equalized, how far we should go, and what competing values might need to be considered. Supporters of capitalism cannot argue that the pursuit of egalitarian aims is in itself unjust or unnecessary since, ideologically speaking, capitalism itself relies on equality of something. Instead, they must explain why the egalitarian impulse is desirable and justified to the extent that it suits them, but undesirable and unjustified in cases where it might suit others. What does equality before the law have, which equality of opportunity, or equality of wealth or income do not have?

Does the traditional axis of left-right politics still make sense in today's capitalist era?

I think we need to completely review our idea of the left-right axis and introduce some historical perspective. The left now is clearly engaged in either mitigating the excesses of capitalism or replacing it altogether, but the entire concept of left and right in politics dates from the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution — a time when the left were the advocates of capitalism — pursuing revolutionary change to overturn feudal privilege. We can reconcile the pro-capitalist origins of the concept of the political left with its current anti-capitalist incarnation if we see it as a program advocating the progressive ideas of the enlightenment, adapting to historical circumstances and advancing from tradition to modernity — from superstition and fear to rationality and understanding. Favoring capitalism was a left-wing position in the 18th century, whereas working toward its extinction is left-wing now. From this perspective — and bearing in mind the earlier point about capitalist ideology's insistence upon (limited) equality — the difference between the liberal left and the socialist left is that the liberal approach is essentially calling out capitalism for failing to live up to its ideological commitments, whereas the socialist left recognizes that even if those commitments were met, we would still be a long way from where we need to be; and to get to where we need to be we need to do more than just fix capitalism's hypocrisy, we need to move beyond capitalism altogether.

If history is a guide, capitalism will eventually give rise to a new socio-economic system, although, as you point out in your book, it is hard for most people to imagine the end of capitalism. How can capitalism be transformed? Can it be

done at the national level given that this system is now global, and the rules of globalization are designed to serve the rich?

To some extent, the transformation has to happen — at least the early stages of it – at the national level, as that is what we have. The nation-state is the demographic political unit of capitalism. There's no reason that has to remain the case though. As we've seen under capitalism, international cooperation can take many forms — from the UN and NATO to the EU and COP. Of course, these are capitalist organizations working for the benefit of capitalist governments and the interests that maintain them, but there's no reason why we shouldn't see cooperation among governments pressing for transformative change — the hard part is to establish those governments in the first place.

What would transformative change look like? The most important thing is that changes must push us in the direction of a revolutionary transition from capitalism to socialism. (The term "revolution" should be taken to refer to a degree and type of historical change, not to the means by which it is achieved, or the timescale involved. Dismantling capitalism is the revolutionary act — not machine-gunning the Spanish Embassy or storming the Winter Palace).

Policies which mitigate the excesses of capitalism are, of course, welcome — but they're not the point. We need policies which undermine and break down the economic power which is concentrated in the hands of a tiny minority. While I argue in the book that it's not going to be possible (or, in fact, desirable in our current situation) to overthrow capitalism overnight, I also maintain that there are policies which socialist governments could adopt which would begin to transform the nature of ownership from the private property paradigm of the capitalist era into a common ownership model for a socialist future.

The key is to break the definitional feature of capitalism, which is that most of us — having no ownership of any means of production — must sell our labor power on unfavorable terms. The standard Marxist approach to that task has been to demand the seizure of the means of production in order to put an end to that exploitation.

I've approached the problem from the opposite direction and proposed a way in which we can take the exploitation out of the employment relationship in order to undermine the power that comes with ownership of the means of production.

While the idea of a job guarantee scheme is not new, its proponents almost always present it as the state becoming the "employer of last resort." What we really need is for the state — in combination with other public bodies and worker cooperatives — to provide a job guarantee while also being the *employers of best practice*.

If the public and cooperative sectors provide the option of a guaranteed job with a fair wage and excellent working conditions, then the private sector is going to need to up its game to attract workers, particularly at the less well rewarded end of the labor market. Exploitation under capitalism is possible because the worker has no option but to accept unfavorable terms — providing an alternative undermines the basis of exploitation.

There are parallels here to the way the National Health Service (NHS) was created in the U.K. in the 1940s. Hospitals were not seized from the private sector… the state simply provided a better option for health care than the private sector could offer. It's time now for the public sector to provide better — significantly better — employment options than are currently available from the private sector. The private sector would then need to match the wages and conditions offered by such a program in order to attract employees.

This isn't something that could happen overnight but would need to be introduced over a period of time, and preferably alongside a similar scheme to undermine the private rental sector by the provision of quality, affordable housing. Add initiatives to repair existing public provisions in education and health care to these public options for employment and housing, and we're starting to move important areas of people's lives significantly away from the capitalist economic structure. No one thinks it's going to be easy, but time is running out for capitalism.

Source:
https://truthout.org/articles/capitalism-has-ended-the-issue-of-scarcity-but-worsened-the-crisis-of-inequality/

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The Waters Are Running Red In Africa's Great Lakes Region – A War Is Raging We Can't Ignore Any Longer

Vijay Prashad

In early November, foreign ministers from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Christophe Lutundula Apala Pen'Apala, and Rwanda, Vicent Biruta met in Luanda, Angola, to find a political solution to a conflict that has been ongoing in eastern DRC for decades. The foreign ministers agreed that the "peace roadmap" agreed to in a July meeting had to be implemented. Angola's President João Lourenço shuttled between Rwanda's President Paul Kagame and the DRC's President Félix Antoine Tshisekedi in his role as the African Union's "mediator in the crisis" between Rwanda and the DRC.

Meanwhile, the M23 rebels—backed by Rwanda—have expanded their attacks in the DRC. In retaliation, the DRC expelled Rwandan Ambassador Vincent Karega. The M23 with the assistance of Rwanda troops captured Kiwanja and Rutshuru, two towns in the DRC's North Kivu province. Rwanda argues that it was the DRC that violated agreements leading to the fighters being reinstated.

In August, a leaked report from the United Nations showed that Rwanda had backed the M23. It was difficult for Rwanda to deny the details in the report, particularly after U.S. Ambassador Robert Wood, alternate representative for special political affairs, told the UN Security Council that his government calls "on state actors to stop their support for these groups, including the Rwandan Defense Forces' assistance to M23." The M23 is a recent entrant into the wars in the DRC's eastern provinces, which have been ongoing since the early 1990s. A UN report from August 2010 details several hundred violent incidents that took place in the DRC between March 1993 and June 2003, with "deaths of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people"; one estimate, based on studies conducted in 2000 and 2004, suggests that more than 3 million people have died in the conflict since 1998.

In June, the DRC allowed the East African Community to send troops into its eastern regions, as long as the Rwandan military was not involved in the intervention. Through this agreement, troops from Burundi and Kenya arrived in eastern Congo. This has caused alarm. Carina Tertsakian of the Burundi Human Rights Initiative told the Associated Press, "It is no surprise that Burundi is the first country to offer troops. Burundi is a direct party to the conflict, so cannot be viewed as a neutral actor. It therefore seems unlikely that their deployment will end the insecurity in the area."

Former DRC presidential candidate Martin Fayulu told Deutsche Welle recently

that he is distressed by the lack of international attention to this conflict. “Ukraine is having a problem,” he said, and the widespread media coverage has brought the world’s attention to that. “[W]e are having a problem in Congo, but nobody is condemning Rwanda. Why?” Perhaps, it has to do with the cobalt, copper, lithium, and the trees of the rainforest, precious resources that continue to be exploited by the rest of the world despite the carnage that has afflicted Africa’s Great Lakes for the past 30 years.

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Source: Globetrotter

The West Is Using COP27 To Shift Blame To Poorer Nations—Private Greed Prevails Over Humanity’s Survival

Prabir Purkayastha

COP27 has begun in Sharm el-Sheikh. Although the Ukraine war and the U.S. midterm elections have shifted our immediate focus away from the battle against global warming, it still remains a central concern of our epoch. Reports indicate that not only are we failing to meet our climate change goals, but we are also falling short of the targets by a large margin. Worse, the potent methane greenhouse gas emissions have grown far more rapidly, posing as much of a climate change threat as carbon dioxide. Even though methane lasts for a shorter time in the atmosphere, viewed over a period of 100 years, it is a more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide.

The net result is that we are almost certain to fail in our target to limit global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels. And if we do not act soon, even a target of 2 degrees Celsius is hard to achieve. At this rate, we are looking at a temperature rise of 2.5-3 degrees Celsius and the devastation of our civilization. Worse, the impact will be much higher in the equatorial and tropical regions, where most of the world's poor live.

In this column, I will address two issues. One is the shift from coal to natural gas as a transitional fuel, and the other is the challenge of storing electricity, without which we cannot shift successfully to renewable energy.

The advanced countries—the U.S. and members of the European Union—bet big on natural gas, which is primarily methane, as the transition fuel from coal. In Glasgow during COP26, advanced countries even made coal the key issue, shifting the focus from their greenhouse emissions to that of China and India as big coal users. The assumption in using natural gas as a transitional fuel is that its greenhouse impact is only half that of coal. Methane emissions also last for a shorter time—about 12 years—in the atmosphere before converting to carbon dioxide and water. The flip side is that it is a far more potent greenhouse gas. Its

effects are 30 times greater over a 100-year period than an equivalent amount of carbon dioxide. So even a much smaller amount of methane has a much more significant global warming impact than carbon dioxide.

The bad news on the methane front is that methane leakage from the natural gas infrastructure is much higher, possibly as much as six times more—according to a March 2022 Stanford University study—than the advanced countries have been telling us. The high methane leakage from natural gas extraction not only cancels out any benefits of switching to natural gas as an intermediary fuel but even worsens global warming.

There are two sets of data on methane now available. One measures the actual leakage of methane from the natural gas infrastructure with satellites and planes using infrared cameras. The technology of measuring methane leaks from natural gas infrastructure is easy and cheap. After all, we are able to detect methane in exoplanets far away from the solar system. Surely, saving this planet from heat death is a much higher priority! The other data is the measurement of atmospheric methane conducted by the World Meteorological Organization(WMO).

The Environment Protection Agency (EPA) in the U.S. estimates that 1.4 percent of all natural gas produced in the U.S. leaks into the atmosphere. But the March 2022 Stanford University study using cameras and small planes that fly over natural gas infrastructure found that the figure is likely to be 9.4 percent—more than six times higher than the EPA's estimate. Even if methane leaks are only 2.5 percent of natural gas production, they will offset all the benefits of switching from coal to natural gas. "Clean" natural gas may be three to four times worse than even dirty coal. At least in the hands of capital!

The EPA does not conduct any physical measurements. All it uses to estimate methane emissions is a formula that involves a number of subjective factors, along with the number of wells, length of pipelines, etc. Let us not forget that there are many people in the U.S. who either do not believe in or choose to ignore the fact of global warming. They would like to take a crowbar to even a weakened EPA, dismantling all measures to reduce global warming.

The impact of methane leaks can be seen in another set of figures. The World Meteorological Organization reported the biggest jump in "methane

concentrations in 2021 since systematic measurements began nearly 40 years ago." While WMO remains discreetly silent on why this jump has occurred, the relation between switching to natural gas and the consequent rise of methane emissions is hard to miss.

The tragedy of methane leaks is that they are easy to spot with today's technology and not very expensive to fix. But companies have no incentive to take even these baby steps as it impacts their *current* bottom line. The *larger good*—even *bigger profits*, but *over a longer time frame*—does not interest them. They aren't likely to change unless they are forced to by regulatory or direct state action.

The cynicism of the rich countries—the U.S. and members of the EU—on global warming can be seen in their conduct during the Ukraine war. The European Union has restarted some of its coal plants, increasing coal's share in the energy mix. Further, the EU has cynically argued that developing oil and gas infrastructure in Africa is all right as long as it is solely for supply to Europe, not for use in Africa. African nations, according to the EU, must instead use only clean, renewable energy! And, of course, such energy infrastructure must be in the hands of European companies!

he key to a transition to renewable energy—the only long-term solution to global warming—is to find a way of storing energy. Renewables, unlike fossil fuels, cannot be used at will, as the wind, sun, and even water provide a continuous flow of energy. While water can be stored in large reservoirs, wind and sun cannot be, unless they are converted to chemical energy in batteries. Or unless they are converted to hydrogen and then stored in either tank or natural storage in geological formations, underground or in salt caverns.

There has been a lot of hype about batteries and electric cars. Missing here is that batteries with current technology have a much lower energy density than oil or coal. The energy from oil or natural gas is 20-40 times that of the most efficient battery today. For an electric vehicle, that is not such a major issue. It simply determines how often the vehicle's batteries need to be charged and how long charging will take. It means developing a charging infrastructure with a quick turnaround time. The much bigger problem is how to store energy at the grid level.

Grid-level storage means supplying the grid with electricity from stored energy.

Grid-level batteries are being suggested to meet this task. What the proponents of grid-level batteries neglect to inform us is that they may supply power for short-term fluctuations—night and day, windy and non-windy days—but they cannot meet the demand from long-term or seasonal fluctuations. This brings us to the question of the energy density of storage: How much energy does a kilogram of lithium battery hold as compared to a kilogram of oil, natural gas, or coal? The answer with current technology is 20-40 times less. The cost of building such mammoth storage to meet seasonal fluctuations will simply exhaust all our lithium (or any other battery material) supplies.

I will not address the prohibitive energy cost—electric or fossil fuel—of private versus public or mass transportation, and why we should switch to the latter. I will instead focus on addressing the larger question of how to store renewable energy so that we can run our electricity infrastructure when wind or sun is not there.

Is it possible that a new technology will solve this problem? (Remember the dream of nuclear energy that will be not only clean but also so cheap that it will not need to be metered?) But do we bet our civilization's future on such a possibility?

If not, we have to look at existing solutions. They exist, but using them means seeking alternatives to batteries for addressing our grid-level problems of intermittent renewable energy. It means repurposing our *existing* hydro-projects to work as grid-level storage and developing hydrogen storage for use in fuel cells. No extra dams or reservoirs, as the opponents of hydroelectricity projects fear. And of course, it means more public transportation instead of private transportation.

All of these existing solutions mean making changes on a societal level that corporate interests oppose—after all, doing so would require public investments for social benefits and not for private profits. Capital privileges short-term private profits over long-term social benefits. Remember how oil companies had the earliest research to show the impact of global warming due to carbon dioxide emissions? They not only hid these results for decades but also launched a campaign denying that global warming is linked to greenhouse gases. And they funded climate change deniers.

The contradiction at the heart of global warming is private greed over social needs. And who funds such a transition, the poor or the rich? This is also what COP27 is all about, not simply about how to stop global warming.

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